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THE BUFFALO STRIKE.

BY THEODORE VOORHEES, GENERAL SUPERINTENDENT OF THE
NEW YORK CENTRAL & HUDSON RIVER RAILROAD.

THE business of a railroad company requires the prompt movement of passengers, mails and freight. To accomplish this a highly complex organization is necessary. Each employee may have but an humble duty to perform, yet the absence of any one of them or any class of employees may block the wheels of the entire machine and disarrange or incommode the traffic. Consequently, the sudden stoppage of work on the part of any number of employees in a single department, although unimportant in itself, may produce serious results to the railroad.

To insure the prompt movement of freight, the work of making up and dispatching trains is divided into two parts—one body of men being engaged in making up the trains at terminal points, another in moving the trains from the terminals to destination. Under the generic term “switchmen” are included all those employees engaged in the operation of shifting and making up trains ready to be dispatched upon the road. This class includes yardmasters, with their assistants, yard conductors and brakemen, and also in some cases the men handling the switches, known as switchtenders.

In the summer of 1888, an agreement was entered into between the companies of the several railroads terminating at Buffalo and their employees in the switching service in that city, establishing their rate of pay. This was an advance upon the rates which had been previously paid in the State of New York, and was a compromise between those rates and the prices paid in Chicago, which were the highest paid in any part of the country.

From the nature of the service, the work in a freight yard of

any magnitude is almost continuous. It cannot be stopped by night or by day, on Sundays or holidays, or at any time. One set of men must relieve the preceding set and keep the motive power in constant use. Perishable freight, such as live stock and other important freight, is being constantly received from connections, and must be handled without any delay whatever, and sent forward.

So well understood is this by all engaged in the work that at the time of the agreement made in 1888 no question was made in regard to the hours of employment. The shifts, so-called, were then, and have been ever since, recognized as of twelve hours each, and the service is constant for every day in the year. In making the agreement a time was recognized as essential for midday or midnight rest and meals, so that the actual hours of labor required on each shift were eleven. The midday or midnight hour was used for providing the engines with coal and water, the practical result being a net use of each locomotive in yard service for about twenty-one hours out of each twenty-four.

These hours being fixed, the schedule of wages agreed upon for the Buffalo men was as follows: Yard conductors, by day, \$65; by night, \$70. Yard brakemen, by day, \$60; by night, \$65, with the proviso that these wages were for the week days in each month, and that an additional allowance at the same rates should be paid for Sunday work.

This agreement in regard to extra pay for Sundays was peculiar to Buffalo and cities west thereof; at all other points in the State of New York the rule being to establish the monthly rate of wages at a sum which included all Sunday work.

During the strike of the Knights of Labor against the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad Company in August, 1890, the yard employees, or switchmen, at Buffalo on that road struck. They had made no grievance known to the company, nor did they make any demand at the time in reference to pay. Their strike was unauthorized by the then leader of the Switchmen's Union, Mr. Sweeny, and as a result their places were filled by non-union men without difficulty.

Prior to this a strike had occurred in the city of Cleveland, O., in the settlement of which the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern Railroad Company, and the New York, Chicago & St. Louis Railway Company, known as the Nickel Plate, agreed to

an advance to their switchmen to an amount practically midway between the prices paid in Buffalo and those paid in Chicago ; that is to say, they did not change the rate of pay named above, but agreed that working days should be recognized as of *ten* hours and that additional compensation should be allowed for the eleventh hour, which was equivalent to about a ten per cent. increase. The example of these railroads was followed by the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad Company at Buffalo, which soon paid the same rates.

During the last session of the legislature a bill known as "The Ten-Hour law" was passed, and signed by the Governor on the 20th of May. By its provisions, ten hours' labor performed within twelve consecutive hours constitute a day's labor in the operation of all steam railroads, and additional compensation shall be paid to any employee who shall be employed or permitted to work in excess of ten hours.

Immediately on the signing of this law, the railroad companies throughout the State very generally notified all employees in yard service that their rate of pay thereafter would be a price per hour instead of the monthly rate previously paid ; the rate per hour being fixed by dividing the monthly rate by the number of hours that had been required in the past. This arrangement was acquiesced in by the great body of employees without question or dissent. The switchmen at Buffalo, however, made it the occasion of what was practically a demand for an increase in pay. The employees of all the roads, excepting the Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, the Nickel Plate, and the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western railroads, about the 11th of June presented petitions to their respective superintendents, demanding that the rate of pay per hour should be advanced, the amount they demanded being arrived at by dividing the monthly compensation paid prior to the 20th day of May by ten, so that they would in effect receive an increase of ten per cent. in the net result.

These demands were declined by all the railroad companies, and but little more was heard of the matter until the initiation of the strike which began on Friday night, August 12, at midnight, when the men of the Buffalo Creek, Lehigh Valley, and New York, Lake Erie & Western railroads went out. A strong effort was made immediately to befog the public mind in reference to the hours of labor—the men claiming they were overworked

and only wanted a ten-hour day. Grand Master Sweeny dilated at length in regard to this, and claimed that "the men are simply asking for what is right," etc.; but it was perfectly understood by all the railroad employees that there was no real question of the hours of labor that would have to be performed in any case, but that the strike was simply an effort on their part to bring about an increase in pay.

Undoubtedly it had been the expectation on the part of the labor leaders, generally, that the passage of the law by the legislature, referred to above, would bring about this result of itself, and the new arrangement of paying them by the hour proved a disappointment. On Saturday night, twenty-four hours after the initiation of the strike, a number of incendiary fires were started in the freight yards of the Lehigh Valley Railroad Company. Eighteen freight cars, loaded with cotton, wool, merchandise, etc., two passenger coaches and two watchmen's houses were burned; and about the same time, a train of ten coal cars was cut loose and ran into a coal trestle, doing considerable damage. Two passenger trains also were thrown from the track, and a train of loaded freight cars on the New York, Lake Erie & Western Railroad was set on fire and destroyed. All through the day on Sunday serious outbreaks occurred between the strikers and the men who were in the employ of the companies endeavoring to move the trains. A passenger train was thrown from the track on the Erie road in the heart of the city. Other incendiary fires were started during the evening.

On Sunday, August 14, the Sheriff of Erie County issued a notice calling for deputies, and up to eleven o'clock the following day he had secured *forty-five* men. These deputy sheriffs were furnished with blue badges and white batons, and were taken out by the sheriff to the scene of disorder on the line of the Erie road. They were met by a handful of strikers, who counselled them in loud voices to be "white men." Terrified, apparently, by the actual presence of strikers, they at once tendered the sheriff their clubs, and, in large numbers, deserted. A small handful remained and gathered in the shade of a freight car to discuss the situation, which remained quiet because no one dared oppose the strikers. The deputies got back to the city with all expedition. The deserters explained afterwards that the strikers came up and mixed in with them and took their clubs away!

The sheriff thereupon said he would go into the town and make a requisition for the militia, "because it was time to do something besides getting a lot of friends of strikers to act as officers." On Monday, August 15, at the request of the sheriff, the Sixty-fifth and Forty-seventh regiments were ordered on duty.

On August 17, the men in the employ of the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad Company were all called out by the Switchmen's Union, and following that the men of the West Shore road also struck.

It was soon discovered that the force of militia at the disposal of the local authorities was inadequate to thoroughly protect and guard all points liable to obstruction on the part of the strikers. The amount of railroad property in Buffalo is very large. Of the 24,000 acres embraced in the city limits, 6,400 are railroad property. The total assessed valuation of the city amounts to \$170,583,385; of this the railroads bear an assessment of \$19,000,000. In four of the city wards the assessed valuation of railroad property amounts to \$9,123,995. The extent of railroad tracks within the city limits, and immediately adjacent in the town of Cheektowaga, is between six and seven hundred miles. On the New York Central & Hudson River and West Shore railroads alone, there are nine miles in length of freight yards, each yard filled with sidings and valuable property.

While the total number of strikers at any one time was but small, not exceeding probably 600 men all told, it required a large force to thoroughly patrol and guard all the different points that were open to attack. The railroad tracks and yards are crossed by numerous public streets and highways, so that it became evident that a very large patrol was necessary before any extensive movement of freight could be attempted, even by a single company. The efforts to move freight that were made during the few days immediately succeeding the opening of the strike were attended with the greatest difficulty—trains being cut in two, employees being stoned, switches thrown, switchtenders driven away at night, etc., etc. The people of Buffalo were thoroughly aroused to the importance of the matter and as to the possible claims that might be brought against the city and county for damages resulting from rioting and lawlessness. The strike on Thursday had spread to all the roads in Buffalo; the switchmen on those roads that were already paying the prices demanded by the Switchmen's

Union going on strike out of "sympathy," so-called, for their fellows.

It was with the greatest reluctance that the sheriff finally gave his consent to appeal to the State government for help ; but early in the morning of August 18 a dispatch was sent to the Governor, signed by the sheriff and the Mayor of the city, asking for additional assistance from the National Guard of the State. The Governor acted with great decision and promptness, and before 3 A. M. a message was received stating that all the papers had been signed and a large force ordered out. This included in all about 5,000 additional troops. That evening a number of companies arrived from Albany, Troy, Schenectady and Amsterdam; and the Twelfth and Twenty-second regiments from New York, and the Thirteenth from Brooklyn, left their homes for Buffalo. Other companies and regiments started during the night, so that by Friday evening, the 19th, the entire force ordered out was in Buffalo, and stationed at various points in the different railroad yards.

Meanwhile, the State Board of Mediation and Arbitration, on the 18th, according to the law under which they hold office, made a formal effort to arbitrate the question at issue between the switchmen and the railroad companies. They held a public meeting, at which the switchmen were represented by Mr. Sweeny, and the switchmen's side of the question was fully brought out. The railroad companies declined to submit their case in any way to the State Board of Arbitration, the reasons given being, first, that those who had left the employ of the companies by reason of the strike were no longer employees, as their places had been filled ; and, second, that there was no obstruction of any kind to the freight service of the railroad companies, excepting by lawless interference and the apprehension thereof, owing to the fact that the properly constituted authorities of the city and county had been unable to furnish protection to those who were in the different companies' service, or those who sought to continue in the performance of their duty. Therefore, there was no grievance or difference between the companies and their then employees. One of the members of the State Board thereupon said that nothing had been accomplished by the Board and that it was impossible to expect that anything would be.

With the advent of the large force of militia, it was evident to all that the strike, so called, was at an end. There was but one

possible way in which it could be extended or the situation made more difficult. If the Switchmen's Union could succeed in getting employees in other departments of the railroad service to strike, out of sympathy, serious inconvenience could be brought to the railroad companies. Consequently, Mr. Sweeny, about the 20th, urged the different organizations of firemen, trainmen and conductors to join in the strike. Mr. Sargent, Grand Master of the Firemen's Association, came to Buffalo on Monday, the 22d, and was joined on Wednesday, the 24th, by Mr. Clark of the Conductors' Association, and Mr. Wilkinson of the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen. Every effort possible was made to induce Mr. Arthur, the Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, to come to Buffalo, but he declined. These leaders held a conference with Mr. Sweeny, on Wednesday evening, the 24th, when he appealed to them for help and begged that their men might be called out on a sympathetic strike, but they agreed that it was impossible under the circumstances. Mr. Wilkinson, of the Trainmen, afterwards said that there could be no such thing as a sympathetic strike under their organization. Grand Masters Clark and Sargent left that night for their homes, and shortly before midnight Mr. Sweeny declared the strike off. The effort to get the other organizations to join was the last that could be made, and, that having failed, there was nothing left to do but declare the strike off, as otherwise there would not have been the slightest chance for the strikers to regain the positions they had abandoned.

There has been a good deal said in the public press of late in reference to the rights of labor; that man is a free agent; that he must be left at liberty to work or not to work as he pleases, and that if he is dissatisfied with his position or his employment, it is his duty to stand aside and allow his place to be filled by some one else, if it can be done. It is evident, however, from a review of the Buffalo strike that the sole and only dependence of the switchmen was in violence and intimidation. Their numbers were small; the service that they perform, while hazardous, yet is hardly to be called skilled labor, and it was evident that their places could all be filled within 48 hours. The only possibility they had of success in their strike was, in intimidating others, by actual violence, from taking their places, and in bringing about such loss and damage and disturbance in the operations of the

railroads, that the managers thereof would prefer to acquiesce in the demands for increased pay, rather than submit to the loss and confusion resulting from the strike.

Had they done as their leaders claimed they did, and as a small portion of the press favorable to their cause counselled,—staid away from the yards and refrained from all acts of lawlessness and violence, there would not have been a necessity for the presence of a single soldier, and the operation of all the roads affected would have gone on without delay and inconvenience, other than the necessary breaking in of the new men. It was on violence and incendiarism that they depended, and it was that which turned against them public opinion and brought to the side of the railroad companies the whole power of the State machinery.

The plea for arbitration which was advocated by a portion of the press, and which is always heard at such a time, was equally chimerical. Arbitration with irresponsible bodies of men, men bound by no law to continue in their employment and with whom no contract would be of any value, will never be successful. In the case of those trades unions whose members are skilled, who have a large body of intelligent and picked men, such as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, strikes are very rare, and arbitration can be safely resorted to, because their body is such that any agreement or contract entered into on behalf of the men by their own leaders can be depended upon to be carried out by the rank and file. Such organizations command respect, and difficulties with them are rare, and when they do occur are readily adjusted.

The occupation of a switchman is one requiring a certain manual dexterity and quickness. That can, however, be readily acquired. It hardly ranks with skilled labor. It is, perhaps, the most hazardous branch of railroad service, and on that account it has been well paid.

Efforts have been made by railroad companies and by legislatures for some years past, looking to an abatement of the dangers of this occupation. The old form of coupling between two freight cars by means of a link and two pins requires that the switchman shall go between the cars and guide the link into place by hand. This operation, performed by night or in bad weather, and with the one thousand and one varieties of height

and dimension of the cars, results in frequent injury to the man. To obviate this, automatic couplers, that will permit the two cars to be joined together without the presence of the man in between, have been invented, and are very largely in use on railroads in this country. Strange as it may seem, the Switchmen's Union has steadily opposed the introduction of the most improved form of automatic coupler. The only explanation of this that is possible is that the organization, as such, has feared that if once the automatic couplers get into general use the dangers of the switchman's occupation would be so greatly reduced that any one could readily fill the place of a switchman, and that, as a consequence, the organization would cease to have any attraction for the great majority of employees, and would fall to pieces. The fact undoubtedly is that if the link and pin could be at once eliminated from the freight service, the operation of switching cars in a freight yard could be performed with the same safety and ease as is now experienced in making up and switching passenger cars in passenger yards. Accidents happening in this latter occupation are exceedingly rare, and any man of average intelligence, with but a few days' instruction, is competent to fill the position of passenger brakeman. When once the same can be said of freight service there will be an end to any such organization as the existing Switchmen's Union, of which Mr. Sweeny has been the Grand Master.

The lesson of the Buffalo strike further shows the hopelessness of any strike that, first, does not have the sympathy, support and countenance of the press ; and, second, of any strike that depends in any measure whatever for success on possible violence or intimidation.

On the other hand, where a strike is the ultimate effort on the part of employees to obtain justice for fair demands from a corporation, and where their efforts are countenanced by the power of public opinion, such a one will almost inevitably prove successful. A few of the labor organizations that have to do with railroad service recognize this and do not permit or countenance any strike until every effort has been made to bring about an amicable settlement of the question at issue. Others, such as the Switchmen's Union, are organizations whose chief cause of being is to band together employees in a specific branch of the service, with a view to increasing their pay by pressure brought

to bear upon the corporation they serve. So far but little has been attempted in this country on the part of the corporations to counteract this tendency on the part of the men.

There is a fascination in railroad service which irresistibly attracts a large number of young men. Once in its power but few leave the service. A man who has followed a railroad career for a number of years is practically unfitted for any other life.

Applications for service are constant and far beyond the number of vacancies to be filled. The result is that, excepting a small portion of the men employed whose services require the greatest skill, the pay of the average railroad employee is small. How natural it is then for them to want to band together and endeavor by combination and consolidation of interests to increase their pay, and render their positions more secure. In regard to the latter, it may be said that a man employed on the permanent staff of any of the great railroads is secure of his position during good behavior, perhaps more so than an employee in any other branch of industry.

The one great evil that affects the railroad service of this country to-day is that there is no provision made for superannuated or injured employees, and but little in the way of insurance for their families in case of death. The various organizations tempt the men by offering an insurance at death, or in the event of total disability, this insurance being dependent on the contributions of fellow members in each case, and not having back of it any capital sum or amount that offers permanent security. When employees are questioned as to the causes which lead them to join various organizations, their answer almost invariably is, "In order to secure some form of insurance." But this makes no provision for old age or superannuation. One or two attempts have been made to provide a fund for the insurance and the care of aged and disabled employees in this country, with more or less success.

The writer believes that some form of insurance or superannuation fund ought to be provided as part of the regular organization of all corporations. Most of the railways in Great Britain have superannuation, insurance, provident, and pension societies, which have been established by the companies, and which the employees are required to join in accordance with the regulations of the road.

A few companies in this country have organized a voluntary relief association, by which any man in the employ of the company, by the payment of a small sum monthly, becomes entitled to a death benefit, or to a sick benefit in case of sickness or injury ; and have also made an arrangement by which the company acts as a savings bank for the employee who desires to deposit any amounts, on which three per cent. interest is allowed by the corporation. This should be extended, in the writer's belief, so as to include some provision for superannuated employees. One of the most difficult questions to be settled is what to do with the old employees who have rendered faithful service and who have become practically unable by age and infirmity to fulfill their duties, and yet for whom no provision can be found in the ordinary operation of the road. If a man entering railroad service in his youth, by paying a small sum monthly, could look forward either to a positive insurance for the benefit of his family in case of death or total disability ; or, second, to a weekly stipend in the case of sickness or injury that would incapacitate him for a time ; and also, to a system of pension to which he could look forward after years of faithful service ; and could feel that back of this he had, not a hazardous dependence on the voluntary contributions of his fellow employees, but the capital account of the railroad corporation which he served, his interest would be largely bound up with the company, and he would hesitate before entering upon any ill-matured scheme of a strike or demand that was not based upon such absolute right and justice as would insure success when all facts were properly ventilated and brought to the bar of public opinion.

THEODORE VOORHEES.